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Monsters in My Closet

Like all bittersweet coming of age stories, this one began at summer camp. I don’t recall the name of this camp or where it actually was, but I assume it was located somewhere between northern Arkansas and the blackest pits of hell. Though I never would have admitted it, I’d always wanted to go to camp. But whatever hidden kernel of excitement had grown within me quickly vanished once I realized that my destination was a glorified seven-day-six-night Bible study, and that my parents (whom I immediately disowned) were dumping me and my brother there so that they could skip off to Branson for a little “mom and dad time” (Being a rather astute nine-year-old, I saw right through my parents’ plot to have sleazy motel sex in the blue-hair capitol of the world). While they were riding around on showboats, I was spending every waking hour, first, being physically attacked by an (I assume) epileptic future serial killer with hair the color of sun-bleached bones and deranged sunken-in blue eyes who liked to karate chop my collar bones in between meditation breaks; and, second, practicing for *Gideon!: The Musical!* This was every bit as excruciating as it sounds. I didn’t even get to be the star because “Gideon is a boy’s part”, a blatant example of gender discrimination for which I could have sued the ridiculous “Jesus is my homedog” shirts right off their backs. But believe it or not, this wasn’t even the most traumatizing thing that went on there.

On the last day of camp, I was walking back to my cabin with one of my friends (a different girl; not the crazy-eyed female Norman Bates).We had just been to lunch and some boys had been teasing me, asking a mocking question about something they claimed my brother had said. When we reached the bridge that had been built over a small creek, I ‘remember’ my friend speaking to me. I have no idea if this actually happened—memories that are thirteen years old are famously unreliable—but when I focus on my memory of crossing that bridge, I hear that freckled blonde girl’s voice in my head.

“They say you’re gay,” she told me. “Your brother told them you’re gay.”

*Gay?* A thousand questions filled my nine-year-old head, and there was a sinking pit in my stomach that felt like a simmering volcano, burning my insides with trickles of molten lava.

*What is gay?*

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She is beautiful.

That was the first thing I noticed when I pulled into the parking spot on the left hand side of my place of employment. I was nineteen years old, almost twenty, and any psychologically scarring summer camp incidents had been mostly forgotten over the years. So as I stared through the huge floor-to-ceiling window at the new employee, taking in her silky brown hair and the gentle curves of the impossibly slender body hidden under khaki pants and a red polo shirt, I wasn’t thinking about the little boys’ questions or asking any of my own.

I was just thinking she was beautiful.

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*What is gay?*

When I thought about the summer camp incident, I always wondered why the word ‘gay’ repulsed me so much when I didn’t even understand it. I thought back to my childish question, and considered it with my adult reasoning.

As I grew, I first came to understand the term ‘gay’ to mean “girls who wanted to be boys”. When I thought about someone being gay, I saw an overweight, masculine girl with acne and body odor who, when she sat down at for lunch, drove everyone to get up and move to another table. I saw a girl who wasn’t pretty at all, and who no guy could ever actually want.

Looking back through my yearbooks brings a sobering realization: all through elementary and high school, I was that girl…and maybe the reason I loathed that word so much growing up was because when I thought about it, all I saw was myself.

But I don’t look like that girl anymore. Today, I have long blonde hair and blue-green eyes even complete strangers tell me are gorgeous. I have an hourglass figure and I like to dress to show it off. My favorite outfit is a leopard print top paired with a short black skirt that stops halfway between my hips and my knees. I accessorize with four-inch heels and a faux-diamond studded belt that hooks around my waist so that when I wear it, everyone can fully appreciate the difference between the size of my waist and the size of my 36 DD breasts. I also wear earrings and a matching necklace, both of which are made of small, triangular black stones and little rhinestones—they match the ones on the belt. The overall effect is *bling, bling, pow.*

Is it still compensating if I know that I’m compensating?

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I was fifteen when I first realized I might be gay. It happened while I was away for a week during a retreat with my church youth group, which was taking place on a rather beautiful campground. I’ll give you a minute to appreciate the multiple levels of irony here.

We were staying in spacious modern cabins that came equipped with indoor plumbing, a refrigerator, two beds and a foldout couch, and a wood burning stove that was undoubtedly just for show. Not exactly roughing it.

The cabin my group was staying in was named “Stagecoach”, because the upstairs bed had once been a stagecoach. Its interior had been removed and replaced with a mattress and bedding, and the ends had been hollowed out to create dressing tables where the girls and I put all of our makeup and hairdryers—but beyond that it almost looked drivable. Since we lived in a democratic society, we decided to swap beds every night so that everyone could sleep in the stagecoach at least once.

Anyway, it was after dark and we’d finished our Bible study and turned in for the night. Everyone else in the cabin was sleeping soundly and I was upstairs, sealed behind the stagecoach doors. The stagecoach interior was dark-colored padded leather, and in the darkness the ceiling stared back at me, black and accusing, as terrible thoughts ran through my young mind.

I kept thinking about girls, how I stared at them just a little too long and how much more beautiful they were than boys and how sometimes, when I couldn’t stop myself, I’d find myself thinking about kissing them. I didn’t think about boys the way I thought about girls. A cold, horrific fear gripped my heart. Tears streamed down my face as I clasped my hands together, grateful for the cover of darkness and the insulation of the plastic windows. Sobs shaking my body, I opened my mouth and whispered desperate, feverish prayers, begging God to rescue me. I was having these desires I’d been taught to think were wrong. Being gay was a choice—I knew that; I been raised to know that—but that didn’t make sense because I hadn’t chosen this. I’d been different all my life, and I didn’t want to be gay too.

“Please God, don’t let me be gay,” I pleaded with Him. “Take it away. Take these sinful thoughts. Make me different. Make me normal.”

I waited for the skies to open up and for Him to heal me; I waited for some kind of answer, but there was nothing. The plastic windows and the stagecoach padding drowned out my muffled sobs and all was silence. No one heard me. It was like being in a coffin.

Burying myself in the woolen blanket, I pressed my tear-stained face into the pillow and told myself for the first of many times that I wasn’t gay. That I wanted to be beautiful and knew that I wasn’t; that I was taking my jealousy of these girls’ pretty faces and perfect bodies and twisting it, so that it had manifested into something it couldn’t be.

That night and many others to come, I sang myself to sleep with lies.

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She is beautiful. Like a snowflake you catch on your tongue on the wintertime or the frost that gathers on the ground when it’s cold and makes the formerly green glass shine like the Emerald City in *The Wizard of Oz.* She is warm like a steaming mug of chocolate, or the white chocolate mochas that we both get every time we go to Starbucks. She loves to smile and laugh and do impersonations of stuck-up pageant queens and mafia kingpins. Once a real stuck-up pageant queen came into the video store and I told Hannah that this girl used to tease me in high school. Scrunching her perfect lines of eyebrows, she put her hands together, drawing her thumbs and index fingers into the shape of a gun, and dove behind a lifesize poster of some movie star, ducking back and forth from behind it, shooting the beauty queen ten times with her make-believe gun.

“Anyone who break your precious little heart, I kill!” she told me once, channeling the illegal immigrant mafia boss that is her favorite alter-ego. “You are beautiful queen!”

I met Hannah[[1]](#footnote-2) in May 2009. I was in love with her by July.

Some days, Hannah and I sit together by the big fountain on our college campus and watching the water splash up, the droplets sparkling against the sky like flying diamonds, the reflected light from them making the small streaks of gold in her hair shine. But the thing I love most about her is her smile, the way it lights her blue-crystal eyes and exposes the crooked teeth in her mouth. She is self-conscious about her flaws, but to me her flaws make her exquisite.

We have the same favorite coffee and the same sense of humor, which she says no one understands but me. We have these things in common, but nothing else. She hates pop music and adores the kind of rock that I can’t stand because I can’t even hear what they’re saying. I love beautiful girls with gold-streaked chestnut brown hair and blue eyes and she loves big, burly girls who hit the gym every day and could probably fold me origami-style into a pretzel.

She is beautiful, like a black widow spider, sleeping upside down in its web so that its red hourglass tattoo is exposed on its underbelly. Like the eye of hurricane or a brightly colored snake whose patterns predict the death of anyone foolish enough to come near.

Lots of terrible things are beautiful, and at first I was afraid of her. I went through a phase where I picked fights with her for no reason. I wanted to her start hating me, but instead she just started giving me hugs every time I said something awful and told me I wasn’t allowed to be mad at her.

But I was never mad at her. I was mad at myself, and at something in me that I could neither deny nor control.

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Part of the reason I was convinced I was convinced I couldn’t be a lesbian was because of all the lesbians I knew, none of them looked like me. Most of the lesbians I saw on TV or in movies dressed in all black leather and had rings in their dark-tinted lips. They didn’t look like feminine college girls; they looked more serial killers in scary movies. They reminded me of my old friend from summer camp.

When I first told my brother I was gay, he stared blankly. “Where are your Birkenstocks?” he asked. “Where are your rainbow shirts?”

I don’t have Birkenstocks or crocs or rainbow shirts, but I do have every Taylor Swift album, a closet full of tank tops, a dresser drawer full of short-shorts and skirts, and about twenty pairs of high-heels. For some reason, this doesn’t inspire people to take me seriously.

“You a computer program,” my brother told me after listening to my rapturous bragging about my recent acquisition of a brand new Justin Bieber notebook. A few months before that, I’d done a Spanish presentation on Taylor Swift and made a sparkly purple poster with stick-on flowers and lots and lots of glitter as a visual aid. “You are the worst lesbian ever,” my father informed me once he’d seen it.

Lowering the poster and hanging my head, I sighed, “I know.”

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When I first met Hannah, she was dating girl with a lip piercing and mountain-tall muscles. I had a small private party when they broke up. Yes, I was sad for her, because they’d been together for two-years and her ex was always pretty nice to me, but she wasn’t very nice to Hannah. At one point she even kicked Hannah out of their bedroom and made her sleep on the couch just because apparently Hannah snores. Besides, while they were dating I couldn’t tell Hannah how I felt because I’m not that kind of homewrecker. The only home I’ve ever wrecked is my own.

Hannah and I hung out about a month-and-a-half after the breakup, and she’d parked far away so I decided to drive her back to her car. While we were getting in, she asked, “Do you have a boyfriend?”

“No,” I said dumbly, my mouth getting numb. I’ve told her I like girls. “Why?”

“Just wondering,” she said with a laugh that was just a little too forced. When we reached her car, I pulled to a stop and Hannah turned to me. “I have a new girlfriend.” An hour of us hanging out and this was the first I’d heard of this. She looked at me like she expected me to say something.

My response proved I am a master of words. “Oh.” Long pause. “What’s her name?”

It was Cami. I changed her name of course; her real name sounds like a sugarplum fairy’s, which is a little ironic since she moonlights as a competitive kickboxer. I googled that bitch as I soon as I got home and while stalking her on Facebook, I found about three-hundred badly photoshopped profile pictures. Most of them were the really annoying kind where the person doesn’t show their face because of oversized sunglasses and their overly-ambitious use of the light/shadow button. The rest were either ‘I’m so hot’ pictures with phrases like “Sex gods” emblazoned across the bottom in neon colors, or pictures of her against various nature backdrops—in the mountains or under huge trees—looking out into the world with a forlorn, tortured expression.

I hate this bitch.

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According to almost everyone I know, I’m not gay.

“I’m telling you, Allison,” my mom lectured as we were driving to Vegas a few months ago. “There’s a dyke gene. And you don’t have it. Do you remember my friend’s daughter Kelly? Well she’s a big time lesbian. And you know how weird she looked. I know this woman at work who’s a lesbian, and even when she wears dresses, she just never looks right.”

“What is ‘right’?” I asked her.

“You’re not a lesbian,” my mom said firmly. “If you were a lesbian, you’d have a moustache.”

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I started dating Mike after I finally accepted that Hannah’s rebound wasn’t a rebound at all. Hannah was in love with her, and I just couldn’t compete with arms that manly. Since I’d never be a ‘real’ lesbian, I decided to settle for being quasi-straight and started dating Mike, a close friend of two years. I wasn’t attracted to him at all, but I thought if I couldn’t make the *When Harry Met Sally* thing work with Hannah, maybe it would work with him.

I treated Mike like shit. I didn’t love him and I wanted him to know that. I kept hoping he’d do us a both a favor and dump me. I didn’t tell him about Hannah until after we were dating. I told him I was still in love with someone else, but I didn’t mention her name…and I left out her gender. But secrets aren’t fun unless somebody knows them, so I kept pushing the issue, hoping he’d guess. I wanted to see how far I could get with it before he called me on it.

“Hannah is so beautiful,” I’d say wistfully. “It drives me crazy.” When that didn’t work, I’d say, “Her girlfriend is so masculine. I always saw her with someone more girly.” Or maybe something simple like, “I hate Hannah’s slut girlfriend Cami. Cami is a bitch. I want Cami to move to Siberia.”

Subtle hints like that.

Naturally, he missed these here-and-there clues and was flabbergasted when I gave up a month later and just told him. He took it pretty well, mostly because he refused to acknowledge that my feelings for her had any significance.

“You’re confused,” he said over the phone one night. He wasn’t being patronizing, he was being sympathetic. “You don’t know who you want to be with,” he said knowingly.

Too bad I’d had a few drinks that night and my inner-bitch wasn’t concerned with letting him down easy. “No,” I informed him. “I want to be with Hannah.” I was sick of being told I was confused.

The first time I kissed Mike was at the playground behind my old middle school. It’s beautiful at night and they recently drilled in a small pond and built a cedar wood gazebo over it. I hung out there a lot at night because I liked the solitude, and one night Mike drove up there to surprise me. I took him by the hand and led him to the pavilion, where I sat on the right hand ledge overlooking the water. He stood in front of me and told me there was nothing in the world that could ever make him leave me, and I could tell that right then he absolutely meant it.

“This would be the most cliché moment for me to kiss you right now,” I said, just before I did.

The first few moments were safe and utterly un-erotic, but the feel of his mouth was slimy and eager, and I could feel it pushing towards a destination I wasn’t ready to lead him to. I shut my eyes tightly as the safe feeling began to wane, and fantasized. I imagined that behind my closed eyes was a pretty face framed by delicate cheekbones, that beneath my fingers was a slender body highlighted with wispy curves and that if my hands kept climbing, they’d become tangled in long chestnut hair. I imagined that the person I was kissing had those same blue eyes I dreamtof every night, and that if I tried hard enough I could almost taste the cherry lip gloss on those soft pink lips. And Mike *did* have blue eyes, and he *did* have a skinny body with prominent cheekbones, and he *did* have lips almost exactly the same color. But he wasn’t her. And I could never fool myself into the thinking he was.

I kept kissing him and neither of us knew that two months from then, I would break up with him at a stoplight just outside his house and that he would cry for half an hour, until his eyes swelled up to the point that they resembled two big pink walnut shells—that he would beg me not to break his heart and I would do it anyway, using an empty pre-formed justification that was probably similar to the one wrecking balls would use if they could talk.

We were ignorant, both ignoring for the moment that after it ended our friendship would be forever damaged, and that we’d scarcely be able to talk anymore without fighting. I never imagined that just a few months from the day I kissed him, he’d call me a bitch through the other end of my purple cell phone, or that another night when I called, I could have sworn I heard him call me a whore.

And he wasn’t wrong. I was a whore when I dated him. I smiled and held his hand in public and kissed my lips to his and none of it was because I wanted him. I hung from his arm, standing next to him like a runway model posing for pictures. The eyes of each person were a camera, and every blink was the shutter of flash photography. I gave my body and physical presence to him for a shot at feeling normal, for the small, insignificant rush I’d get when someone would see me with my hand in his and I’d get to think, ‘See? I’m just the same as you.’ Whores sell their bodies on street corners for a twenty dollar bill; I gave myself away for the validation of strangers. Calling me a prostitute is an insult to prostitutes.

But when I kissed him and tried to pretend he was Hannah, I didn’t know any of this—or maybe I knew all of it and still remained deaf to the voice in my ear whispering one last truth I chose to ignore: that months later, after all the fighting had died down and he lost much of the strength he’d used to rage at me, Mike would call me late at night and ask who I had been thinking about when I kissed him, and I would answer honestly.

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It seems as though my friends and family have built a conspiracy of silence.

“Can’t we talk about something else?” my mother asked in frustration one night. “Being gay is all you want to talk about. You’re really obsessed with it.”

That’s what she calls it—an obsession. When I was twelve years old and I had my first crush on a boy, she smiled and there was a twinkle in her eye as she teased me about being “in love”. She called it love when I was twelve and it was a boy, but now that I’m twenty-two and the object of my utter worship is a woman, it’s a “crush” and an “obsession”.

I want tell her that I’ve kept my mouth shut for over twenty years. I want to talk about it now, but no one wants to listen.

My best friends, who cried on my shoulder about their boyfriends cheating on them or unplanned pregnancies or drama with friends or trouble with school and who listened as I recounted every single date with every single *guy* I ever went out with, now suddenly have nothing to say when I tell them about Hannah. One friend listens intently and then tries to set me up with guys. A second friend sits stone still whenever I mention Hannah and folds her hands, staring out the window with a tense set in her shoulders. *‘Please let it be over’,* is scrawled over every inch of her body. She never adds to any conversation about Hannah or my sexuality; she doesn’t even use Hannah’s name.

Even Hannah doesn’t really understand. “Yeah, because you’re gay now,” Hannah said once with an eye-roll, her voice was laced with sarcasm. We’ll talk and I’ll tell her stories from my weekend and she’ll laugh. She laughs because I’m funny. I am absolutely fucking hilarious.

It’s so funny that Alli knows every single word to every Taylor Swift song, including the unreleased demos. I’m sure she’d laugh if I told her that just last week I bought a toothbrush that plays Justin Beiber songs for four straight minutes while I brush my teeth. It’s comical to her that I spend a hundred dollars on high heels, and that I hate exercise and the outdoors and have no interest in kicking anyone’s ass for money.

My love for Hannah is right there in the way I stare at her after she leaves; in the way I made her cupcakes after she had a fight with Cami and spelled ‘I love you’ over the pink frosting in M&Ms, sprinkles and licorice; or the way I picked a purple flower for her out of the planter holder by the fountain, right after she did her beauty queen impersonation, and gave it to her as a prize. But real gay girls love hiking and underground bands and they don’t care what their hair looks like or carry ten pounds of makeup in their purse. Gay girls don’t look like me; they look like Hannah’s girlfriends. So Hannah will never understand me; she’s as blind to transparency as Mike was. She took that purple flower and left it on the dashboard of her car for months, saying it made it smell nice. I wonder if it’s still dying there.

Just before Christmas, I got really drunk and called Mike. We talked for an hour and before I knew it I was on my knees in my bathroom, clutching the side of that plastic tub with one hand and my cell phone with the other, sobbing so hysterically that I could barely get the words out.

“I love her,” I choked out, barely holding myself up. “I would die for her! I’d take a bullet for her and it’s the same! It’s the same as the way you loved me and those other whores you dated before me!”

“It’s not the same,” he said gently. “I know you think it is, but it’s just not.”

“No, it’s the same!” I cried out. “It’s the exact same! There’s nothing different about it and there’s nothing wrong with me! It’s perfectly normal! *I’M* normal! And I love her even if she never loves me back!”

“Of course you’re normal.” I could hear tears in his voice when he spoke. We were crying now, together. “It’s just like…how all my friends keep telling me I have to move on…but I can’t let you go.”

And through my drunken haze, it dawns on me that Mike talks to his friends about me, and I’ll bet they listen. I’ll bet they even say my name, and when his heart is breaking, I’ll bet no one ever tells him that his feelings aren’t real.

So he’s right; it is different for him.

I want to marry Hannah and have a family with her. I want a future and a life and seven kids with brown hair and bright eyes that glitter like stardust. I want everything everyone else wants. More than anything, though, I just want acceptance.

I guess everyone has their white whale.

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Last October, two things happened that changed everything. The first was that I ran into Cami. I tried to avoid her, but she flagged me down and talked to me for three or four minutes. Our conversation was actually rather delightful. She listened to me talk and it even seemed like she cared about my Spanish class, which is amazing since *I* don’t care about my Spanish class. She smiles a lot. And she’s a lot prettier than I originally gave her credit for (even if she never did take those damn sunglasses off). Turns out, talking to her at length didn’t make me want to stab her in the eye with my three-inch heel, so maybe I overacted when I called her a stupid whore…and an evil fire-breathing dragon…and wrote all those short stories about her being devoured by rabid zoo animals.

My bad. Everyone makes mistakes.

The second thing was that I got a text from Hannah. In the previous weeks, I’d confided in her about finally opening up to my parents, and she said that she wished she had the courage to tell her own. My parents struggle, like any parents would. I think they still mourn my future in the heterosexual world, and I think at times it makes them uncomfortable. But they surprised me, and I thought Hannah’s would surprise her, so I encouraged her to tell them. A short time later, she texted me, ecstatic. She’d told her mother and her mother was “really sweet about it.” She thanked me for my advice.

I realized that the one obstacle keeping Hannah from enjoying her life with Cami to the fullest potential was now removed, and I had helped her do it. Strangely, that didn’t hurt; it was freeing. For the first time since I’d fallen in love with her, I realized that even though that my love was unrequited, it wasn’t useless. I loved someone, and it was good. I didn’t have to be a wrecking ball anymore. I could put her needs ahead of my own and love unselfishly. I could make her life better, even if I was making it a better life for her to share with someone else.

It’s been three months since I got that text message, and three months since I truly moved on with my life. I loved Hannah. I love her still, and I will never regret her. My love for her was and is a beautiful thing and she was and is a beautiful person. I’ve just decided to stop needing her love to make me who I am.

Months ago I bought a notebook so I could start to keep a diary. I set it aside with all the other notebooks I swore I’d write in, but the night I called Mike, I scribbled something inside of it. I was too drunk to remember what I had written, but last I opened the notebook. It was a love note. To myself.

*Dear Alli, there is nothing wrong with you. You are beautiful, like Taylor Swift says. You are the way God made you. And God loves you how you are. Loving Hannah doesn’t make you imperfect. It makes you Alli. You are you and that’s amazing. P.S Fuck anyone who hates.*

When I read my own note, tears came to my eyes. My own words reminded me of something my father said—my father, who never embraced the conspiracy of silence in the first place and talks with me often. “If you’re gay, be the best gay sonofabitch you can be.”

I struggle with who I am daily. Part of me will always be that little girl sealed up inside a stagecoach, wishing she were different, but another part of me knows there’s a reason God didn’t answer my prayer. Part of me will always feel a longing when she sees a man and a woman in the restaurant at the table in front of her, the woman stroking his face as she stares into his eyes. Part of me will always want that, but I want it the way that *I* want it, and my happily ever after doesn’t need a man. I’m not a fairy tale princess; I’m the best gay sonofabitch I can be. On some level, I may still be in that stage coach, but I won’t hide in the closet any more. I need that room for my high heels.

1. I changed Hannah’s name and the name of her girlfriend Cami. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)